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## Church, World and Christ in Teilhard de Chardin

In the cosmology and theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Church has not often been considered to possess any significant function. In fact, Teilhard devotes considerable attention to several key questions in ecclesiology. Fundamental to Christian mission is an incarnational theology of the conversion of the Church to the world: acceptance by the Church of the modern world as currently and contingently constituted. The Church is called to transform, in its sacraments and through the practical works of its members, the materiality of the world. Catholicism centred on Rome has the potential to bring all Christians to unity in a self-transforming ecumenism. Furthermore, Teilhard suggests that ecclesial convergence could encompass other religions. He recognises that currents within different religions, such as mysticism, often have more in common with each other than with different traditions in their own confession.

In a note written for Jean-Baptiste Janssens, his Superior General, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin expresses the wish that his work will provide a ‘porch’ into the Church for many of their contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> This accurately summarises Teilhard’s aim: to provide an interpretation of the historic Christian religion that addresses the modern world in its current, contingent particularity, and is founded upon the essential and unchanging gospel truths. This has, to some extent, been his achievement. What makes this qualification necessary is that Teilhard’s identity as a theologian and apologist for Catholic Christianity has frequently been occluded, for better or worse, by his expositors and supporters. Analysis and creative interpretations have often depended more on Teilhard’s scientific and philosophical studies than on his theology. This has had the effect of marginalising Teilhard in Christian

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Basis of My Attitude’ (1948) in *The Heart of Matter* (New York: Harcourt Harvest, 2002), p. 148. XXX

theological discourse. In this essay, I will attempt to redress some of this imbalance by examining his ecclesiology. In particular, I will consider his claims about the unity of the Christian Church, and its relations with other Churches and the wider created order.

In the Preface to his principal theological work, Teilhard states: ‘The most traditional Christianity, expressed in Baptism, the Cross and the Eucharist, can be interpreted so as to embrace all that is best in the aspirations peculiar to our times’.<sup>2</sup> Teilhard is acutely conscious that he is living in a new world, in which former assumptions and traditions can no longer be taken for granted.<sup>3</sup> This effort to present the historic Christian faith, into which he had been born and in which he grew, in terms that engaged with modern society became, for Teilhard, a project that continue for a lifetime. His ecclesiology is not concerned to develop a detailed analysis of structures, still less to make prescriptions for change: he takes the current ordering of the Church for granted. He wishes to examine, by contrast, ways in which the existing Church might orient itself in relation to a world living in an era of profound change.

Teilhard argues that the Church has become progressively more estranged from what the inaugural words of *Gaudium et Spes* refer to as ‘the joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties of people today’.<sup>4</sup> He considers the beginnings of this process to lie in the Renaissance humanism of the fifteenth century when a significant body of science, art and learning began to flourish independently of ecclesial control or patronage.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Divine Milieu*, new trans. by Sïon Cowell (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), p. 43. XXX

<sup>3</sup> Teilhard’s consciousness of the world was transformed during his service as a stretcher bearer during the First World War, during which he produced his first mature theological essays. Many of these are included in the collection *Writings in Time of War* (London: Collins, 1968). See also *The Making of a Mind. Letters from a Soldier Priest, 1914-19* (London: Collins, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> This and other material from the Second Vatican Council is extracted from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. N.P. Tanner, II (2 vols.; London: Sheed and Ward, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> e.g. ‘The Sense of Man’ in *Toward the Future* (New York: Harcourt Harvest, 2002), p. 21.

responsibility for the designation of this body of scholarship and enterprise as ‘secular’ rests, he suggests, squarely with the Church. Teilhard describes the resulting clash between the Church and the ‘secular’ world in the following stark terms:

Think of all the infantile maledictions pronounced by Churchmen against new ideas! Think of all the avenues of enquiry that have at first been forbidden and later found to be rich in results! Think of all the futile subterfuges designed to make people believe that the Church was directing a movement by which it was, in fact, being forcibly dragged along!<sup>6</sup>

In his later work, Teilhard states that the stage of development through which the world is moving is not a continuation of a process begun in the Renaissance so much as a qualitatively new phenomenon, which he terms this ‘neo-humanism’.<sup>7</sup> Similarities may, nonetheless, be identified, above all the challenges presented to established religious institutions.

### Conversion of the World

The first article I wish to discuss is ‘Some Reflexions on the Conversion of the World’, which Teilhard produced in 1936.<sup>8</sup> Teilhard believes implicitly that the Church is ‘the instrument of salvation for all, and sent as a mission to the whole world’.<sup>9</sup> In his conclusion to the article, he makes constructive suggestions for how the Church might orient itself towards the modern world in order to further its mission to all people. The terms in which the question is presented are themselves suggestive. Teilhard does not consider the Church to exist as part of the world, but to possess a mission to the world that is made

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Mastery of the World and the Kingdom of God’ in *Writings*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Basis of my Attitude’, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> *Science and Christ* (London: Collins, 1968), pp. 118–27.

<sup>9</sup> *Lumen gentium*, § 9.

possible by its identity as essentially distinct from it. He therefore begins by drawing a distinction between *reconciliation to* the modern world and *acceptance of* the modern world. He believes that, whilst the Church might have achieved the first, it has in any case not accomplished the second. There persists an abiding fear within the Church, he argues, of becoming committed (*s'engager, se donner*) to the modern world. The Church is afraid to surrender its self-identity to the world in order that a new identity may be formed by a process of mutual conversion of world to Church, and the reverse. Crucial to such a surrender would be the recognition of the immense quantity of goodness present in the world. Teilhard complains: 'Still the talk goes on of the *mundus senescens* - "the ageing world" - the *mundus frigescens* - "the world growing cold" - never of the *mundus nascens* - "the nascent world".' Whilst the Church verbally assents to some of the results and prospects of progress, he continues, this so often falls far short of whole-hearted affirmation: 'Sometimes she gives her blessing but her heart does not go with it.' The Church too often only tolerates the world, and expends too much time and energy lamenting the loss of past images, discourses, customs and language.

The consequence of this refusal to recognise the nascent quality of the world is 'completely to paralyse the conversion of the world'. On the one hand, people outside the Church continue to regard it as insincere, because it fails to share in 'their sufferings, their work, or their hopes'. Far from embracing and promoting scientific, technological and other development, the Church is more likely to be found challenging its methodology and conclusions. On the other hand, 'the faithful inside the Church continue to feel ill at ease, caught as they are between their faith and their natural convictions or aspirations'. This is a perennial concern of Teilhard's, and discussed at length in *The Divine Milieu*. In this study, Teilhard reflects on the adverse consequences of the tendency to value prayer and action in terms of the intention motivating them, rather than by the practical effects which they produce in the world.<sup>10</sup> He continues:

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<sup>10</sup> *The Divine Milieu*, especially pp. 50-62. XXX

You can convert only what you love: if the Christian is not fully in sympathy with the nascent world – if he does not experience in himself the anxieties and aspirations of the modern world – if he does not allow the sense of man to grow greater in his being – then he will never effect the emancipating synthesis between earth and heaven from which can emerge the parousia of the universal Christ. He will continue to fear and condemn almost indiscriminately everything that is new, without seeing among the blemishes and evils the hallowed efforts of something that is being born.

The Church's mission, Teilhard argues, will fail, unless the Church, and each of its members, loves the world. He perceives throughout his forty years of writing, moreover, that the Church is dependent on love not only for its mission, but for its continued existence.<sup>11</sup> He states:

Is it not a fact, and this I guarantee, that if the love of God were ever to be extinguished in the souls of the faithful, the enormous edifice of rites, hierarchy, and doctrines the Church represents would instantly fall back into the dust from which it came?<sup>12</sup>

Authority, tradition, Scripture, or reason might, of course, form part of the context in which many particular religious commitments are, in fact, made. Nonetheless, religious commitment itself is not motivated, Teilhard argues, by any of these positive elements of religion. It is, on the contrary, the pure love of God, in and for itself, that motivates and sustains all religion.

In his early work, Teilhard identifies a 'rift in charity' (*caritas*) that has developed between the Church and the world.<sup>13</sup> Natural love, rather than being

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<sup>11</sup> On the dynamic of love in the Church, see Henri de Lubac, 'The Church of Christ' in *The Eternal Feminine* (London: Collins, 1971), pp. 178-89 and Mathias Trennert-Helwig, *Die Urkraft des Kosmos. Dimensionen der Liebe im Werk Pierre Teilhards de Chardin* (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), pp. 158-92. A good discussion with no specific reference to ecclesiology is Ursula King, 'Love: A Higher Form of Energy in the Work of Teilhard de Chardin and Sorokin', *Zygon* 39, 1 (2004), pp. 77-102. XXX

<sup>12</sup> *The Human Phenomenon*, new trans. by Sarah Appleton-Weber (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2003), p. 212.

<sup>13</sup> 'Soul of the World' in *Writings*, p. 180.

offered to the Church, is being directed towards purely human activities. This rift has adverse consequences for both Church and world. The Church, for its part, is being deprived of the energy and devotion it needs in order to continue in existence. Conversely, the world lacks a directing focus which may gather up its natural aspirations and offer them to the transcendent principle at which they implicitly aim. Teilhard observes: 'The religious aspirations of modern humanitarianism are distressingly vague and aimless.'<sup>14</sup> He nevertheless finds reasons for continuing to invest hope in the Church's capacity for love. Just two months before his death, he writes: 'It is indisputable that the most ardent collective focus of love ever to appear in the World is glowing *hic et nunc* at the heart of the Church of God.'<sup>15</sup>

Teilhard possesses an incarnational theology of the Church's place in the world. The Church exists for the world, and it is for love of the world that the Church has been born in the world. As Christ entered into the world to die and thereby to save it, the Church is called to die to its own collective self and to gather up and sanctify worldly needs and aspirations:

To plunge into in order then to emerge and raise up. To share in order to sublimate. This is precisely the law of the Incarnation.

As has been clearly stated, however, the Church, although existing for the world in love, is never *of* the world. The description of the Incarnation just cited appears to be derived from an earlier account of the Baptism of Christ, which clarifies this point:

Christ immerses himself in the waters of Jordan, symbol of the forces of the earth. These he sanctifies. And as he emerges, in the words of St Gregory of Nyssa, with the water which runs off his body he elevates the whole world.<sup>16</sup>

The baptism of Christ evidently cannot be understood in the same way as human baptism. Christ did not seek baptism in order to have sins forgiven, nor to receive the Holy Spirit. Rather, Gregory suggests, Christ represents in his

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<sup>14</sup> 'Modern Unbelief. Its Underlying Cause and Remedy' in *Science and Christ*, pp. 116-17.

<sup>15</sup> 'The Christic' in *Heart of Matter*, p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> *The Divine Milieu*, p. 110. XXX

baptism all those who will be baptized in his name.<sup>17</sup> Christ therefore leads the way to baptism, and makes it possible for all who follow him to receive the Holy Spirit. The Church, as the body of Christ in the world, is thus given a similar function of immersing itself in the world and offering that world to the Father.

### Church, Matter and Spirit

Use of the metaphor of the baptism of Christ to describe the immersion of the Church in the world enables Teilhard to portray this in characteristically earthy and physical terms. The Church is called to gather up and to sanctify not only humanity but the whole material order. This concern for materiality can be traced to Teilhard's early writings. As part of its engagement with the world, the Church will need to engage with the material element of that world. It already achieves this fairly well, Teilhard believes, by means of its traditional forms. He affirms:

In its dogmas and sacraments, the whole economy of the Church teaches us respect for matter and insists on its value. Christ wished to assume, and had to assume, a real flesh. He sanctifies human flesh by a specific contact. He makes ready, physically, its Resurrection. In the Christian concept, then, matter retains its cosmic role as the basis, lower in order but primordial and essential, of union; and, by assimilation to the Body of Christ, some part of matter is destined to pass into the foundations and walls of the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup>

Matter, therefore, is transformed, spiritualised and directed towards the final end of the world: union with Christ and the spiritual vision of God. The sacramental transformation of matter is not, however, from the Church's point of view, a completed task. It is, by contrast, a continuing process.

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<sup>17</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, 'On the Baptism of Christ. A Sermon for the Day of the Lights' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series II, V (14 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 518-24.

<sup>18</sup> 'Cosmic Life' in *Writings*, p. 64.



To examine how this occurs would require a separate essay. Two points can, however, be noted. First, Teilhard regards the transformation of matter effected in the Eucharistic host as not confined to the ecclesial sacrament itself. Matter as a whole becomes, by contrast, the object of the consecration that is inalienably exemplified in the host.<sup>19</sup> Second, the presence of Christ in the substance of the host, by which the host is preserved as a unity, constitutes the exemplar for the presence of Christ in the world and the preservation of its composite substances. Teilhard believes that Christ is present not only in the host. Christ in reality sustains all composite substances in an analogous way.<sup>20</sup> At the very least, it would seem that this attempt to situate a theory of Eucharistic presence in the context of a general theory of the action of Christ on substances in the world might provide foundations for an ecumenical understanding of the nature of Eucharistic substance.

A further indirect consequence of the materiality of the world is the diversity of ministries in the Church, both at one particular moment in time, and at different times. Teilhard operates with an implicit Neoplatonic ontology of being, according to which the corollary of materiality is dispersal and diversity. God, by contrast, is ineffable and is one.<sup>21</sup> A refusal to accept diversity within the Church amounts, therefore, to a failure to recognise that materiality is intrinsic to the human condition. Teilhard writes of a Church which accepts its materiality, and not just its spirituality, in the following terms:

It is probable that the Church is led, at different times in the course of her existence, to emphasise in her general life now a greater care to collaborate in the earthly task, now a more jealous concern to stress the ultimate transcendence of her preoccupations. What is quite certain is that her health and integrity, at any given moment, depend upon the

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<sup>19</sup> See two short stories, 'The Monstrance' and 'The Pyx', in *Hymn of the Universe* (London: Collins, 1961), pp. 46-55 and 'The Priest' in *Writings*, pp. 203-224.

<sup>20</sup> See 'The Universal Element' in *Writings*, pp. 286-302.

<sup>21</sup> See 'The Struggle Against the Multitude' in *Writings*, pp. 93-114.

exactitude with which her members, each in their proper place, fulfil their functions which range from the duty of applying themselves to what are reputed to be the most profane of worldly occupations, to vocations which call for the most austere penances or the most sublime contemplation. All those different roles are necessary. The Church is like a great tree whose roots must be energetically anchored in the earth, while its leaves are serenely exposed to the bright sunlight. In this way she sums up [elle résume] a whole gamut of beats in a single living and all-embracing act, each one of which corresponds to a particular degree or a possible form of spiritualization.<sup>22</sup>

The Church is thus called to unify the material and the spiritual orders at every particular moment in time by containing within itself some forms of faith in which the spiritual predominates, and others in which the material is privileged. This is well-expressed by the analogy of the tree: its roots, trunk and leaves all need each other in order to survive and to grow. The analogy suggests, moreover, growth through time through the synthesis of essential material nutrients by the light of external revelation. The reference to summing up, or recapitulation, indicates the affinity of Teilhard's view of the Church with that held by Irenaeus of Lyons. The Church is the body in which materiality encounters and is transformed by revelation. For both theologians, sacred teaching provides 'the beginning, the middle, and the end' of the divine economy and its operation for the salvation of humankind.<sup>23</sup>

### The Church as Axis of Convergence

I have, so far, considered Teilhard's ecclesiology in fairly conventional terms: mission, conversion, incarnation, sacraments. Teilhard's vision of the Church is, however, linked intimately to his theory of convergence. He believes the

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<sup>22</sup> *The Divine Milieu*, pp. 100-101. XXX

<sup>23</sup> *Against the Heresies* (New York: Paulist, 1992), III, 24, 1. For the affinity of Teilhard with Irenaeus, see the conclusion of Bernard Sesboüé, *Tout récapituler dans le Christ. Christologie et sotériologie d'Irénée de Lyon* (Paris: Desclée, 2000), pp. 203-205.

universe to be evolving from its current state of dispersal towards a final unity. This doctrine has sometimes been described as ‘cosmic convergence’, and has been widely disseminated and espoused by people with no interest in the ecclesial foundations of his thought.<sup>24</sup> This secularised reading of Teilhard’s theory of convergence cannot, however, be sustained, for two reasons. First, he clearly states that the movement of the world towards unity will only be completed by a consummation of the world by Christ.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, and more pertinently to the present discussion, he believes that this convergence is only made possible by the Church, which is ‘the central axis of universal convergence, and the exact meeting point that springs up between the universe and Omega Point’.<sup>26</sup> In the words of Xavier Tilliette, the Church is ‘the axis of the Christification of the universe’.<sup>27</sup> Teilhard states: ‘If the Church is not to be false to herself ... she cannot but regard herself as the very axis upon which the looked-for movement of concentration and convergence can, and must, be effected.’<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> It is this interpretation that is subject to trenchant criticism in David H. Lane, *The Phenomenon of Teilhard. Prophet for a New Age* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> This is stated with particular clarity in Teilhard’s final essay, ‘The Christic’ in *Heart of Matter*, pp. 80-102.

<sup>26</sup> ‘My Fundamental Vision’ in *Toward the Future*, p. 192.

<sup>27</sup> Xavier Tilliette, *Le Christ des philosophes. Du Maître de sagesse au divin Témoin* (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1993), pp. 423-24.

<sup>28</sup> ‘The Zest for Living’ (1950) in *Activation of Energy* (New York: Harcourt Harvest, 2002), p. 241n. XXX See Henri de Lubac, ‘The Axis of Rome’ in *The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Burns and Oates, 1965), pp. 186-96, Christopher Mooney, ‘The Church and the parousia’ in *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (London: Collins, 1966), pp. 146-88, Émile Rideau, *Teilhard de Chardin. A Guide to his Thought* (London: Collins, 1967), pp. 202-205, and Mathias Trennert-Helwig, ‘The Church as Axis of Convergence in Teilhard’s Theology and Life’, *Zygon* 30, 1 (1995), pp. 73-89.

If the Church is to fulfil its function as an axis of convergence, it needs, Teilhard argues, to be united. Only through believing in its full, visible unity will the Church be able to promote social, political and spiritual unity among the peoples of the world. In 1944, he writes:

If Christianity is in truth destined to be, as it professes, and as it is conscious of being, the religion of tomorrow, it is only through the living, organic axis of its Roman Catholicism that it can hope to measure up to the great modern humanist currents and become one with them.<sup>29</sup>

In his ecclesiology, Teilhard considers ‘Catholicism centred on Rome’, and ‘in the cold strictness of its Catholic claims’, including its mystical tradition, to possess a unique and inalienable role in bringing the world to faith in Christ.<sup>30</sup> He affirms: ‘to be a Catholic is the only way of being fully and utterly Christian’.<sup>31</sup> Teilhard could have agreed with the following description of the Church offered by Henri de Lubac:

It is the meeting point of the divine world descending from God and the human world rising up to God. It bears within itself an irreducible duality, being oriented both towards God and towards the world. It reflects the mystery of Christ, and is called to unify the whole world in Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Teilhard does not, therefore, wish to defend the unique place of Catholicism centred on Rome for purely dogmatic reasons. The focal position of Rome

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Introduction to the Christian Life’ in *Christianity and Evolution* (New York: Harcourt Harvest, 2002), p. 168. XXX XXX ORIG

<sup>30</sup> ‘Human Energy’ (1937) in *Human Energy* (London: Collins, 1969), p. 157 and 160, and Henri de Lubac, *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Collins, 1970), p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Introduction to the Christian Life’, p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar and Georges Chantaine, *Cardinal de Lubac. L’homme et son oeuvre* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1983), pp. 122-35. See the study Henri de Lubac, ‘Ascent and Descent in the Works of Teilhard de Chardin’ in *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin - Maurice Blondel. Correspondence* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1976), pp. 143-68.

derives, rather, from the fact that its unique ministry of unification that it claims is expressed in its theology and lived out in its ordering and sacramental worship.

Teilhard's perception of a unique deposit of faith present in Catholic Christianity is confirmed during his visit to Rome in 1948. He describes 'the extraordinary focus of spiritual radiation concentrated by the two thousand years of history these places have witnessed', and affirms: 'In these days, it is here in Rome that we find the Christic pole of the earth.' He continues:

The Eternal City has made no violent impact on me ... but I have been impressed (and heartened) by Christianity's extraordinary, really imperturbable, confidence in the unshakable solidity of its faith and truth. There is a remarkable phenomenon there, unique, in fact, in the world.'<sup>33</sup>

Teilhard's previous descriptions of the power and energy present in Catholic Christianity are thus confirmed by his personal witness concerning its focal place.

This can be contrasted with his impressions on visiting Canterbury Cathedral over thirty years earlier. Teilhard served his tertianship at St Mary's College, the house of the French Jesuits in exile in the city, and so might have entered the Cathedral on many occasions.<sup>34</sup> He describes attending Evensong as follows:

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Whilst appreciative of the human quality of the worship, Teilhard does not appear to have experienced the same type of 'spiritual radiation' on this occasion.

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<sup>33</sup> *Letters from a Traveller, 1923-1955* (London: Collins, 1962), pp. 299 and 302.

<sup>34</sup> Details concerning the house are given in 'Canterbury' in *Établissements des Jésuites en France depuis quatre siècles*, ed. P. Delattre, I (five vols.; Enghien: Wetteren, 1939-57), §§ 1060-68. The building, in the St Stephen's area, was demolished soon after its sale in 1929. Teilhard failed to complete his formal tertianship, owing to his mobilization for service in the First World War.

<sup>35</sup> *Letters from Paris, 1912-1914* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), pp. XXX.

It should, by now, be clear that Teilhard considers philosophy to possess a twofold function. First, it exists to establish certain ‘preambles of faith’ which are preparatory to and, ultimately, justified by, religious revelation. Secondly, philosophy can be put to apologetic use. In a letter written in response to a critique of one of his essays by Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, he refers to his additional desire to establish ‘causes of credibility’ for Christian belief.<sup>36</sup> Teilhard states: ‘The act of theological faith is not denied, for it has not yet come up for consideration.’ His philosophical work is, however, defined by different from those of the historic preambles. Teilhard is not concerned to establish the existence of the soul and the free will of the individual human person. More pressing for him are topics related to the constitution of the world: its materiality, its spirituality, and, above all, its telos. He is acutely aware of living during an age in which, in words from the Declaration on the Church’s Relation to Non-Christian Religions, ‘the human race is being daily brought closer together and contacts between the various nations are becoming more frequent’. Consequent on this is a need to consider ‘what things human beings have in common and what things tend to bring them together’.<sup>37</sup>

This analysis clearly challenges caricatures of Teilhard that portray him as an advocate of a post-Christian, global religion. If this is understood to mean that the claim of historic Christianity to possess a uniquely true revelation is no longer valid and that the future for people of faith lies in a single generic religion which subsumes within it the specific truth claims of the various particular religions, then nothing could be further from Teilhard’s actual view. He is an exponent not of confluence, but of convergence. One can even hear resonances in his work of statements contained in recent magisterial teaching about the Church, not only prolegomena but doctrinal statements too. *Ut unum sint* affirms, for instance, that ‘the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church’ in which is contained ‘the fullness of the means of salvation’, and that ‘the communion of the particular Churches with the

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<sup>36</sup> Letter of March 1947 cited in De Lubac, *Faith*, p. 187.

<sup>37</sup> *De habitudine ad religiones non-christianas*, § 1.

Church of Rome, and of their Bishops with the Bishop of Rome, is – in God’s plan – an essential requisite of full and visible communion’.<sup>38</sup>

Teilhard’s ecclesiology provides the best perspective from which to account for his frequently critical comments about non-Christian religions.<sup>39</sup> The reasons for his low estimation of other religions could, at one level, be attributed to a lack of knowledge, concern for the individuality of the person and the reality of phenomena, failure to distinguish religion from culture, specific negative experiences, or other characteristics of an ethnocentric perspective. Much could be made of these factors by postcolonial analysis. Teilhard’s critical assessment of religions different from his own could be regarded as being in tension with his theory of convergence. He certainly does not seek to foster convergence of religions by means of ongoing conversation, in the way that Hans Küng has done. The claim that Teilhard’s assessments of other religions are incompatible with his theory of convergence would rest, however, on a misunderstanding of that theory. On the contrary, as King states, ‘Convergence always occurs around a specific axis which denotes the overall direction of future developments’, and, ‘True convergence means the presence of an overall orientation, an axis along which certain developments of major importance occur’.<sup>40</sup> It is necessary to go beyond these statements, however, and identify the axis by name: by its very nature, it must be a concrete entity and not an abstract principle. The fundamental reason,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ut unum sint. Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father John Paul II on Commitment to Ecumenism* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1995), §§ 86 and 97.

<sup>39</sup> For collation and analysis, see Ursula King, *Towards a New Mysticism. Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions* (London: Collins, 1980), pp. 47, 49, 59-61, 75-6, 80-1, 99, 123-37, 146-8, 183, 187, 190, 207-12, 224. A useful table listing references for specific comparisons made between Christianity and Eastern religions is compiled on p. 237.

<sup>40</sup> Ursula King, *Towards a New Mysticism*, pp. 163-4 and *The Spirit of One Earth. Reflections on Teilhard de Chardin and Global Spirituality* (New York: Paragon, 1989), pp. 124-5. King offers a similar assessment in ‘Teilhard’s Reflections on Eastern Religions Revisited’, *Zygon* 30, 1 (1995), pp. 47-72, noting (p. 67) that Teilhard was at least as critical of Christianity.

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therefore, for Teilhard's frequent unsympathetic assessments of other religions is simply that they do not constitute this specific axis. It needs to be stated unambiguously that, in Teilhard's theology, the axis of convergence is the Church centred on Rome.

### Conversion of the Church

Whilst clearly affirming that Catholicism centred on Rome constitutes, in principle, the future for the mission of the Church, Teilhard expresses concern that this form of Christianity is not currently fulfilling its calling to universality. In commenting on a recent study of the place of the Church in contemporary society, he makes a rare acknowledgement that Christian communities apart from his own might possess a greater ecumenical capacity than his own Church:

In the non-Roman branches of Christianity a spirit of religious invention is finally manifesting itself which is the sole possible agent of a true ecumenism: not the sterile and conservative ecumenism of a 'common ground' but the creative ecumenism of a 'convergence' ... on to a common ideal.

Theologians in Rome, Teilhard had suggested in a previous letter, were not facilitating this convergence.<sup>41</sup>

In a much earlier essay, he affirms that progress towards greater visible unity in the Church, and the conversion of those who do not currently confess the name of Christ, requires, above all, the conversion of the Church. By this he means, of course, the conversion of Catholicism centred on Rome. There is a need for the Church to 'look for her God *as though* she might lose him'.<sup>42</sup> He continues: 'I believe that the world will never be converted to Christianity's hopes of heaven, unless first Christianity is converted (that so it

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<sup>41</sup> Letters to Soulange Lemaître of 1953 and 1950, cited in King, *Towards a New Mysticism*, p. 98. The work under discussion is J.V. Langmead Casserley, *The Retreat from Christianity in the Modern World* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1952).

<sup>42</sup> 'Note on the Presentation of the Gospel in a New Age' (1919) in *Heart of Matter*, p. 218.



may divinise them) to the hopes of the earth.’ The corollary of Teilhard’s conception of the Church as providing the world with its axis of convergence is his awareness of the provisionality of the Church. Gathering up and sanctifying the elements of a dispersed world, the Church necessarily shares in the imperfection and incompleteness of that world. Convergence is a process that far from complete. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church describes, in similar terms, how the perfection of the Church lies solely in the future: ‘The church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus and in which through the grace of God we attain sanctity, will reach its completion only in the glory of heaven, when the time for the restoration of all things will come.’<sup>43</sup> This suggests the need for a nuanced conception of ecclesial inerrancy. Christopher Mooney describes Teilhard’s understanding of the infallibility of the Church in the following pertinent terms: ‘To say that the Church is infallible is simply to recognise that it possesses what any living phylum possesses, namely the capacity to find its way through innumerable gropings towards maturity and fulfilment.’<sup>44</sup>

Teilhard gains an increasing perception of the existence of two categories of believers ‘cutting across the existing religions’, defined by the extent to which they possess a sense of the numinous.<sup>45</sup> A Christian with a pronounced mystical sense might, for instance, identify with this aspect of Sufism and Tantric Hinduism more than with other modes of prayer within her own religion.<sup>46</sup> Similarities can be identified between this insight and the distinction made by Henri Bergson between ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ religion, which is not, after all, a distinction that he applies solely to Christianity. Bergson provides a detailed analysis of the regenerative property of the

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<sup>43</sup> *Lumen gentium*, § 48.

<sup>44</sup> Mooney, *Teilhard*, pp. 158-59.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Some Reflections on Progress’ (1941) in *The Future of Man* (New York: Harcourt Harvest, 2004), pp. 61-81. XXX

<sup>46</sup> ‘Some Notes on the Mystical Sense. An Attempt at Clarification’ in *Toward the Future*, pp. 209-211.

mysticism inherent in 'dynamic' religion.<sup>47</sup> The moral status of good persons and beautiful objects possesses a real religious value. The fact, nevertheless, remains that its possessors are not participating in the sacrament of unity that is the one Church 'centred on Rome'. Teilhard states:

There are, no doubt, many individuals outside Catholicism who recognise and love Christ, and are therefore united to him, as much as (and even more than) some Catholics. But these individuals are not grouped together in the 'cephalised' unity of a body which reacts vitally, as an organic whole, to the combined forces of Christ and mankind.<sup>48</sup>

This description of the church as 'cephalised', in other words, as resting upon a firm, rock-like foundation would have held particular significance for Teilhard, due to his abiding appreciation for materiality and geology.

### Obedience

The corollary of Teilhard's theory of convergence by conversion to Catholicism centred on Rome was, in his own life, his personal obedience to its institutions: in practice, both the Curia and the Gésu. This is manifest at several key decision points in Teilhard's life: his departure from France in 1904 during the expulsion of religious communities,<sup>49</sup> his exile to China

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<sup>47</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 209-265.

<sup>48</sup> 'Introduction to the Christian Life' (1944), p. 168.

<sup>49</sup> Teilhard's own account of his departure can be found in XXX. There is a historical review by Patrick Cabanel, « Le grand exil des congrégations enseignantes au début du xxe siècle », *Revue d'Histoire de l'Église de France* 81 (1995), pp. 207-217. Awareness of this episode challenges the frequently heard opinion that the academic and religious vocations within the Church imply a retreat from politics and other aspects of 'real life'. The Waldeck-Rousseau and Combes legislation in fact turned the teaching orders into the most highly politicised part of the French Church. Cabanel suggests, moreover, that the exiles which they precipitated served as a prelude for the Vichy expulsions.

following official investigation of his reflections on the doctrine of original sin,<sup>50</sup> and his acceptance of decisions that *The Divine Milieu* and others of his works should not be published.<sup>51</sup> He expresses the reasons for his obedience in a remarkable short essay, ‘On My Attitude to the Official Church’:

The more I become aware of certain failures on the part of the Church to adapt herself, of a loss of her vitality (to which I shall return later), the more I recognize how incompetent I am and how ill-qualified to take it upon myself to give a definitive appreciation of her in her general or, if you would prefer the word, her axial character. The Church represents so powerful a channelling of what constitutes the moral and ‘sublimating’ life-blood of souls, a conduit dug so deep into the whole of man’s past – in spite of certain accidental and ephemeral lapses from generosity, she has to so marked a degree the faculty of encouraging human nature to develop itself fully and harmoniously, that I would feel guilty of disloyalty to Life if I tried to free myself from so organic a current as the Church provides.<sup>52</sup>

Despite its faults, the Church constitutes the ‘most perfect approximation’ to the truth available to humanity. This is because it preserves a dynamic, living tradition and hands this on from one generation to another. Ecclesial tradition

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<sup>50</sup> See René d’Ouinice, *Un prophète en procès: Teilhard de Chardin dans l’Église de son temps* (Paris: Aubier, 1970), pp. 100-137 and Henri de Lubac, ‘Tradition and obedience’ in *Eternal Feminine*, pp. 190-99.

<sup>51</sup> See *Lettres intimes à A. Valensin, B. de Solages, H. de Lubac, 1919-1955*, ed. Henri de Lubac (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1972), pp. 230-37 and 432-34. Malachi Martin, *The Jesuits. The Society of Jesus and the Betrayal of the Roman Catholic Church* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 298, refers to ‘the publication of *The Divine Milieu* in 1927’ as evidence for failure of obedience to the Church. In fact, the *nihil obstat* required as permission to publish the work was not granted and Teilhard made no attempt to publish the work. Its first formal publication was in 1957, two years after his death. For detailed discussion, see Haiyan Wang, *Le phénomène Teilhard. L’aventure du livre Le milieu divin* (Saint-Étienne: Aubin, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> *Heart of Matter*, pp. 115-18.

does not, however, provide a complete revelation of truth at any particular moment in time:

The Church possesses and transmits from century to century a view of Christ – an experience of Christ, a way of living Christ – whose *definitive form, and whose richness*, she is unable at any given moment *to express completely*.

The present imperfection of the Church is, Teilhard implies, well-suited to the imperfect state of human nature as currently constituted. In order for the Church to exist integrity, it is necessary that it recognise its imperfection.

Teilhard proceeds to affirm that the life and knowledge of Christ are part of the deposit of the whole Church, both priests and laity, of all ages. Just as the Church at any particular temporal moment neither fully lives the life of Christ, nor possesses perfect knowledge of Christ, so this life and knowledge cannot be regarded as the possession of any particular ministry of the Church. All Christians are called to share in the task of interpreting the gospel. The inclusive nature of the work involved will obviously influence the hermeneutic that arises. One respected exponent of Teilhard's thought has referred to 'the *development* of the fundamental and immutable content of the Christian message, through its intellectual unfolding, under the action of the Spirit, who animates and nourishes the Church's consciousness'.<sup>53</sup> 'Intellectual' might, however, permit a misleading interpretation of the development. Teilhard complains that dogma 'is still explained by some theologians in terms of a narrowing, naively intellectualist theory. In the view Dogma evolves simply by rational analysis of the formulas in which it is expressed.' The implication of this theory of dogma, he critically continues, is that a 'sufficiently penetrating intelligence' would be able 'to unravel Dogma and exhaust its meaning'. Teilhard affirms, by contrast, that dogma cannot ultimately be an object of demonstrative reasoning:

Dogma evolves in accordance with a much more complex logic, much slower, much richer, than that of concepts. It evolves as a man does: he is *the same* at the age of forty as he was at the age of ten but his shape

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<sup>53</sup> Rideau, *Teilhard*, p. 179.

at forty cannot be *deduced* from what it was at ten. The Church changes in the same way: she has a certain identity, but it is the identity of a person, of an organism; and it does not exclude – on the contrary it presupposes – a framework of truths that can be expressed in formulae. They can practically all be reduced to this single one: Christ is the physical centre of the gathering together of souls in God. These formulae, however, express an invariable aspect of truth which will necessarily assume a continually new aspect according as man becomes more conscious of his past and of his environment.

Teilhard does not, unfortunately, prosecute this analysis to demonstrate the relationship between truth and the formulae which articulate it. Nevertheless, from the fact that the dogmatic teaching of the Church expresses, at any particular time, a merely imperfect understanding of truth, it does not follow that the Christian is free from obedience to that dogmatic teaching. Individuals might be able to gain greater conceptual understanding of theology, for instance, by withdrawing from Church life and living as anonymous or implicit Christians. In following this path they would, however, no longer be participating in the life of the Church – its worship, sacraments, festivals and fellowship - in which its dogma truly consists. Teilhard is convinced of the importance of living with the Church, and of living within it.

A final word on the subject of obedience concerns the question of the portion of the Church to which obedience is owed in circumstances where there appear to be conflicting loyalties. A helpful distinction here is the one made by Henri de Lubac between ‘particular’ churches and ‘local’ churches.<sup>54</sup> De Lubac defines *particular* churches as being those whose identity is dependent upon and part of that of the single, universal Church. The *local* church comprises, for De Lubac, a group of particular churches sharing specific social or cultural elements. The local church, therefore, remains dependent on the universal identity of the Church. Failure to accept this suggests, at the very least, a limited understanding of the relation of individual

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<sup>54</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church; Particular Churches in the Universal Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982).

Christians to the wider human and cosmic world.<sup>55</sup> Teilhard would wholeheartedly concur with De Lubac on the particularity of churches.

It seems important to restate this conception of the identity of churches in contexts in which the prospects for Church growth are perceived to lie in the fostering of ecclesial identity as local, at the expense of particularity, understood as a dimension of universality. In some places, the privileging of local identity is bound up with a historic parish system based on geographical territory. This is sometimes bound up with uncritical acceptance of the normative status of postmodern social theory. The suggestion has been made, for instance, that theology needs to emerge from intersubjectivity within 'local churches' rather than be the gift of a teacher 'travelling in from afar'.<sup>56</sup> One might respond that welcoming a visiting theologian has the potential to provide a far better approach to learning and ecclesial hospitality than following a standard course or surfing the internet. In any case, Teilhard believes the opposite. In the contemporary world, identity is so often construed as participation by an individual in a larger whole. Mobility within and between nations, and forms of non-geographical identity, are omnipresent in ordinary life as never before. By virtue of its missionary imperative, the Church is called with urgency to preserve its own, corresponding, universal identity, and to foster its further development. Much progress has, indeed, already been made towards this end. For instance, the capacity of the Church centred on Rome to make use of international news media in its mission, after it had identified the task as of sufficient importance to merit conciliar deliberation, has become one of the outstanding successes of Christianity in the modern world.<sup>57</sup> Churches need to continue to explore new ways of existing as particular churches within the universal Church.

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<sup>55</sup> Jean-Pierre Wagner, *Henri de Lubac* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), pp. 170-71.

<sup>56</sup> John Reader, *Beyond All Reason. The Limits of Post-Modern Theology* (Cardiff: Aureus, 1997), p. 137.

<sup>57</sup> In the Decree on the Mass Media, *De instrumentis communicationis socialis*.

## Conclusion

It is not sufficiently recognised that a coherent ecclesiology emerges from the theology and cosmology of Teilhard de Chardin. By contrast, the Church has on several occasions criticised opinions attributed to Teilhard when, in fact, most of the views he actually holds about the Church are profoundly orthodox and of significant apologetic value.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, they have the potential to provide some valuable insights in current ecclesiology, above all because they challenge conceptions of it as a discipline concerned primarily with questions of internal order. Genuine ecclesiology, Teilhard believes, can in fact only be pursued once situated in a context of mission to the world.

This mission can have no purpose unless the Church maintains its distinctive, universal identity as the Church of Christ. Missionary activity which focus on changes to the internal ordering of churches frequently fail to achieve this. Much time and energy can be expended on pastoral reorganisation, definition and pursuit of training objectives, vocational development, ‘theological education’, improving management, and so on. These sometimes appear more as missions by the world to the Church, rather than by the Church to the world. Teilhard’s silence on matters of internal church ordering is suggestive, especially in light of his radical analysis of the changing nature of society. He appears to believe that the existing ordering of the Church is more or less right, and that the work of the Church can be renewed by a continual return to the fundamentals of faith, without the need for radical changes to its structures.

Notwithstanding his high doctrine of the authority and ecumenical ministry of the Church centred on Rome, Teilhard emphatically regards the ecumenical venture as one that calls for self-questioning by all participants. The Church is called to recognise its provisionality and the facts that it exists for the world and for Christ. Indeed, in its sacramental action it unavoidably

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<sup>58</sup> For discussion of these, see Jean Lacouture, ‘Obedience and Teilhard’ in *Jesuits. A Multibiography* (London: Harvill, 1996), pp. 431-41, Antonio Russo, « Rome et Teilhard », *Recherches de science religieuse* 69 (1981), pp. 485-507 and Georges Ordonnaud, *L’Ere nouvelle de la coresponsabilité* (Paris: Pedone, 1991), pp. 150-55.

sanctifies, even if unintentionally, the wider world. The work of the Church thereby becomes a public possession that surpasses any attempt at dogmatic expression:

In a sense, Christ is in the Church in the same way as the sun is before our eyes. We see the same sun as our fathers saw, and yet we understand it in a much more magnificent way. I believe that the Church is still a child. Christ, by whom she lives, is immeasurably greater than she imagines. And yet, when thousands of years have gone by and Christ's true countenance is a little more plainly seen, the Christians of those days will still, without any reservations, recite the Apostles' Creed.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> 'On My Attitude to the Official Church', pp. 117-18.